

MYTH *10*

Spirit Dictated



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So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.

Romans 8:12-14

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.

Galatians 5:16-18

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As I flew into Omsk in Siberia during a winter teaching trip, it was 6:00 in the morning—dark, windy, and very cold. Descending the stairs from the plane to the snowy, icy ground, my heavy overcoat felt like a flimsy windbreaker. Half skating, half walking, I moved toward the terminal, which was in total darkness. We gathered outside locked double doors in a dimly lit passageway, illuminated only by distant lights. No instructions were provided; but it would not have helped since no one spoke English. Everyone seemed to know that we must wait until the airport personnel opened the terminal.

I was tired, cold, and bewildered; that’s when I saw him. He looked to be about 45 years old, 5’10” in height, and weighed about 220 pounds. He wore a leather cabby’s hat, pulled down close to his eyes and a dark leather coat. The shocking thing was his face; he could have been the poster child for the KGB. If he had said, “Come with me,” I would have known I was a goner. That’s when I noticed he was holding a sign—a sign with my name on it. Either I was in real trouble, or he was a friend. Fortunately he was the latter; he came to pick me up.

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When you are in a foreign country and you do not know what to do or how to get to where you need to go, *you need a guide*. While our citizenship is in heaven (Eph. 2:19), the Scriptures tell us that we are aliens and sojourners in a foreign land. We need instruction and guidance (1 Pet. 2:11-12).

Directions for the Journey

God has not left us without a road map for our lifelong Christian adventure. As discussed in *Myth 8: Spirit Causes Transformation*, the Scriptures are God's resource for the believer to be "adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Ultimately the primary and necessary resource for the

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Christian life is God's written Word. Those who follow after Christ must open the map, study it, and do what it says. This is so simple. But why do most Christians' maps remain folded, and are laid aside collecting dust? No doubt the reason is that we would rather rely on shortcuts than expend effort in deciphering the map ourselves. We reach for

a spiritual GPS to search out the quickest and easiest route, rather than experience a journey that includes rough spots along the way. Yet the bumps in the road and the rough spots develop stamina and maturity.

Led by the Spirit

Only two verses in the New Testament address the subject of the leading or guiding of the Spirit: Romans 8:14 and Galatians 5:18. To understand how God leads the believer, we must consider these two texts.

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But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. But if you are *led by the Spirit*, you are not under the Law (Gal. 5:16-18, italics added).

In *Rethinking Empowerment* the present author argued that Romans 8 presents a contrast between *life* and *death* (vv. 2, 6, 10, 11, 13), representing the two realms of existence in which the believer can choose to live.¹ Paul explained that the two spheres in which the believer can live are *according to the Spirit* or *according to the flesh* (vv. 4-5, 12-13). While some understand the life-and-death theme in Romans 8 to refer to heaven and hell, the context indicates that a believer has the potential to live in the sphere of life or the sphere of death, that is, he can choose to live in disobedience to God (resulting in death—loss of fellowship) or he can live in obedience and fellowship with God (resulting in life—enjoyment of fellowship). The two forces—the flesh and the Spirit—are presently vying for influence over the believer’s walk. The result of living according to the flesh is death, a separation

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from fellowship with God. On the other hand to live according to the Spirit leads to enriched, abundant living (John 10:10b) in which the believer experiences intimacy with Christ. A believer's choices have consequences. One outcome is stated in verse 14. "All who are being *led by the Spirit*...are sons of God." Those who are being led by the Spirit belong to God, and they also experience intimacy with God, in the realm of abundant living.

The context of Galatians 5:18 is identical to that of Romans 8:14. As discussed in *Myth 7: Spirit's Power Causes Christian Walk*, the same choices confront the believer: the flesh and the Spirit. Choosing to walk in a manner pleasing to God gives visual evidence of the character of God in the believer's life (Gal. 5:22-23).² On the other hand the influence of the flesh in the believer's life leads to behavior that does not reflect God (vv. 19-21).³ The "deeds of the flesh" in Galatians 5:19 are identical to the "deeds of the body" in Romans 8:13. In Galatians 5 the clauses "walk by the Spirit" (v. 16), being "led by the Spirit" (v. 18), "live by the Spirit" (v. 25), and "walk [together] by the Spirit" (v. 25) are essentially synonymous terms. To be led by the Spirit is equivalent to walking by the Spirit; it can be experienced, or on the other hand it can be forfeited, depending on the believer's choice.

In both passages the antithesis between flesh and Spirit presents two opposing forces that seek to influence the thoughts and behavior of each Christian. In fact both are competing to lead the believer in one of two different directions: one toward God and the other away from God. First John 1:6-7 gives us perspective.

If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.

The flesh, the capacity to sin, is in conflict with the Spirit. Each

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believer must choose which one he will follow — whether led by the flesh into darkness or by the Spirit into light. Christ is the Light and since He is revealed through the Word of God, only as we walk in the light of God’s Word can we experience intimacy in fellowship with Him. To walk according to the Spirit or to be led by the Spirit concerns the alignment of our thoughts and actions to the instructions of God’s Word, the very words the Spirit inspired. As we renew our minds through the Word and live it out in obedient behavior, we are being led by and walking according to the Spirit into the Light. On the other hand, if we dismiss the Word of God and pursue a self-seeking agenda, we move into darkness and are led by the flesh, not the Spirit. Both forces rival to influence the believer, with the Word being the constant to which or from which the believer vacillates. Exclusion from intimacy with God is a reality for the believer when he sins just as it was true for Adam and Eve. The Spirit, however, leads us by the Word to the light and encourages us to continue to choose intimacy with Christ.

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Leading Misunderstood

Realizing that God can do anything He chooses and can provide “special” guidance, our concern in this discussion is with the normal way God interacts with the Christian. The truth of the Spirit’s leading has been misconstrued in a number of ways. The Biblical picture of leading by the Spirit is that of a shepherd who leads His sheep by means of the Scripture and the believer decides if he will follow. Some, however, have a different view, thinking that believers are directed by some spiritual GPS saying, “Turn right onto

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Pleasant Street one mile ahead.” Others liken the Spirit’s ministry to an admiral with bullhorn shouting, “Now hear this!” Even worse, some envision the Spirit as a rancher driving cattle into one shoot or another. Sincerely searching for God’s direction, many approaches miss the truth embracing error instead.

A Still, Small Voice

People often say, “God speaks to us in a still, small voice,” referring to a prompting from God or an inner voice that brings insight, understanding, or direction. The origin of this idea comes from 1 Kings 19:12. Elijah defeated the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18), enraging Jezebel who then threatened Elijah’s life (19:2). Elijah fled and finally arrived at Horeb, the mountain of God, in order

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to distance himself from the threat (vv. 3-9). God came to him saying, “What are you doing here?” (v. 9). Elijah lamented, “I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away” (v. 10). Obviously God questioned Elijah’s retreat; yet God would display His awesome power, just as He did centuries earlier at this very location with Moses. He assured Elijah of His control over all events in history. Verses 11-12 read, “And a great and strong wind

was rending the mountains and breaking in pieces the rocks....And after the wind an earthquake....After the earthquake a fire...and after the fire a sound of a gentle blowing.” Then God again asked the question, “What are you doing here?” (v. 13). Elijah again lamented, “I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away” (v. 14). At this point, God told Elijah to leave Horeb, and God told him of the

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ministry he would then undertake. Understanding the folly of running away, Elijah departed.

Verse 12 is translated in a variety of ways: “and after the fire a sound of a gentle blowing” (NASB), “a still small voice” (NKJV), “a gentle whisper” (NIV), “a gentle and quiet whisper” (MSG), “a sound of sheer silence” (NRSV). The New Revised Standard Version translation, “and after the fire a sound of sheer silence,” seems preferable. One author writes,

This phrase is not describing some secret, tender, quiet communication between God and Elijah. It’s describing “the calm after the storm,” the intense silence that came after the bombastic display of God’s glorious power. It was not God whispering to Elijah but a silence that got Elijah’s attention and caused him to come out of the cave.⁴

The phrase “a still, small voice” does not represent the intent of 1 Kings 19. God moved from a demonstration of power (vv. 11-12a) to silence (v. 12b). However, many Christians have accepted the various wordings of the phrase and have used the verse as a proof that God guides through internal divine prompting or some inner voice. In reality, this is only a “Christian cliché” with no claim from the Scriptures.⁵

God Told Me

Have you ever heard someone say, “God told me”? I listened to a preacher say, “God has given me this message for you today.” What do you do with those statements? *First*, you cannot deny their sincerity because the person believes God spoke directly to them. *Second*, unless endowed with the gift of prophecy (2 Pet. 2:20-21), this person should not expect direct revelation from God. In fact, someone’s belief regarding the permanent or temporary status of

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certain spiritual gifts to the church would determine his understanding of direct revelation. While some people today profess to have the gift of prophecy, this assertion is questionable.

One evening after studying a difficult Bible passage late into the evening without grasping its meaning, I went to bed. Waking in the morning, it was as if a light bulb came on; the passage and its implications became clear. Now is that God's direct revelation? Is that the same thing the preacher above had in mind? No.

I own a market-research firm that faces numerous problems any business would confront. I had worked late into the evening to try to resolve a computer-programming problem. Being unsuccessful, even after thoroughly exploring every option, I went to bed. When I woke up I intuitively knew how to solve the difficulty. Do you see any parallels between the "religious" illustration and the "business" one? Is the business example any different from the religious one? Did God provide direct revelation in both cases? Obviously not. Rather in both instances it was my mind processing and synthesizing all the information and arriving at a conclusion.

Open and Point

No doubt you have also known people who use the open-and-point method to find direction from God. Opening the Bible to any page, they point to any verse. This haphazard method then becomes the direction for a particular problem. Obviously the New Testament provides no basis for this technique, so it should not be an option.

Opened and Closed Doors

When believers are looking for a new home or job, they frequently turn to God to open or close doors for direction in their decision. Frankly I am not sure if God is concerned if you have a 1,500- or a 3,000-square-foot home. First Timothy 6:8 gives us perspective: "If we have food and covering, with these we shall be

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content.” So perhaps a 10,000-square-foot house would be over the line. But what if you make a very low bid on a property that is not accepted? Was it God’s doing that the door was closed? What if you do not prepare properly for a job interview and as a result you are not offered the job? Was it God closing that door? Rather than picturing God kicking down doors or bolting them shut, it is better to look at life through a rearview mirror to see how He has influenced past decisions.

Often when we are faced with an important decision, a logical and thoughtful approach leads to a wise conclusion. We obviously should seek God on any decision we are making, and we should seek to align our wills to His (James 4:13-16). Listing the positives and negatives about anything you are considering can help clarify your thinking and shed light on the issue.

Claiming a Promise

Remember that the context of any passage is important. The context is certainly critical in understanding James 1:5. “But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.” In this verse there is a promise that is based on a condition: wisdom is the promise, and prayer is the condition. As a result, many cling to that verse, asking God to give them wisdom concerning particular decisions or courses of action. While the promise of wisdom is absolutely true, the problem comes when the promise is misunderstood. The guarantee of wisdom has nothing to do with

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God's will as to which school you should attend, whom you should marry, or where you should live or work. Rather the point of the text relates to understanding why God allows various trials in the believer's life (James 1:1-4). The context indicates that believers should "ask in faith" (v. 6), confident in the goodness and faithfulness of God amidst trials. Verses 2-8 show that wisdom is needed to understand that the purpose of trials is to develop our maturity in Christ.

Rather than which school to attend, whom to marry, or where you should live and work, God's concern is with the kind of person you will be, no matter what school you attend, whom you marry, and where you live and work. The emphasis of James 1 is on your response to the problems you face in life, not on resolving them.

People often ask God to give them a parking place near the entrance of a store. But rather than providing a convenient place to park, perhaps God would rather desire that your attitude be developed as you walk one hundred yards and get some exercise. Some people ask for God's direction on which kinds of apples to buy at the grocery store, whether Red Delicious or Granny Smith. But does God care? Perhaps He prefers that you just pick the ones you like best!

Conclusion

Misunderstanding God's leading must be seen in light of its consequences. What if it turned out that my conclusions on the passage being studied as discussed above were actually wrong? Would that be God's fault? Suppose two Christians had prayed about whom to marry, waiting on God to confirm their choice? Receiving some confirmation of their choice, they marry and then get a divorce. Would that be God's fault? We need to adjust our understanding of God's leading to conform to His Word. That crucial change makes all the difference.

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Guidance, Please

While there are numerous techniques believers employ to find direction from God, the New Testament only knows of one true and reliable approach. The will of God is found in the Word of God, and the believer must allow the Spirit of God to influence his mind and behavior through the Word. The Spirit does not direct or dictate believers' actions. He leads those who desire to follow from God's Word.

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Myth 10, NOTES

1. Ken Neff, *Rethinking Empowerment* (St. Augustine, FL: LQ Press, 2011), 17-18.
2. “But the *fruit of the Spirit* is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law” (Gal. 5:22-23, italics added).
3. “Now the *deeds of the flesh* are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Gal. 5:19-21, italics added).
4. Mike Mercer, *Rethinking the Text: God’s “Still, Small Voice”?* (www.internetmonk.com; June 13, 2010).
5. Ibid.